NORTH CAROLINA
MUSEUM OF HISTORY

History Happens Here

Civil War History Mystery

Distance Learning Program

Teacher Supplement

Table of Contents

Program Overview

Civil War History Mystery focuses on ways that historians unravel mysteries from the past. Through interactive discussions and hands-on activities, students will become historians as they use observations, hypothesis, and analysis to identify artifacts from the Civil War time period.

The **Preprogram Activities** include a discussion sheet and a work sheet. The **Postprogram Activities** include several articles from *Tar Heel Junior Historian* magazine and suggested activities. These materials will help students focus more on the Civil War in North Carolina and will also encourage them to think about how historians and scientists use observation, analysis, and hypothesis of artifacts to figure out what happened in the past.

CIVIL WAR RESOURCES FROM THE NORTH CAROLINA MUSEUM OF HISTORY

History-in-a-Box: *North Carolina and the Civil War*
Explore the Civil War in North Carolina through touch objects that tell stories of a soldier on the battlefront and a woman on the home front. The companion video features a young soldier relating his wartime experiences. Resources for teachers include background materials, lessons, and activities. The kit is available for loan for three weeks at no charge (you pay return UPS shipping). To order, call 919-807-7984 or go to http://ncmuseumofhistory.org/edu/HistoryBox.html for an order form.

Distance Learning Program: *Civil War Stories from North Carolina*
Civil War Stories from North Carolina focuses on five North Carolina families and their lives during the war. Through interactive discussions and hands-on activities, students will discover that there was no one way to experience the many events and changes brought about by this war. To schedule, contact Jerry Taylor at 919-807-7972 or e-mail jerry.taylor@ncdcr.gov.

Preprogram Activities: Preprogram Discussion Sheet

Have the students sit around you on the floor or at their desks. Read aloud to them, pausing to ask and answer questions. This discussion sheet is a framework for you to build upon. Feel free to use your own examples that you know will appeal to your students. Key vocabulary is underlined.
Time required: 15 minutes

Have you ever wondered how we know about the way people lived long ago? How do teachers and parents know about life in the "old" days?

Historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists study objects made and used by people who lived long ago to learn about the past. They call the objects artifacts. An artifact is any object made or used by a human. It can be pottery, a diary, a plant, or even old garbage!

Historians study artifacts to learn about what happened long ago. Like detectives, they analyze artifacts to learn about what people did, where they went, and what they owned. Historians also use many primary documents to learn about the past. Some common primary documents are journals, inventories, photographs, and diaries.

Many people kept diaries long ago—even young people like you! Do you keep a diary? What things do you (would you) write about?

What could a historian learn by reading your diary?

Did you know that even garbage gives us clues about the past? Some archaeologists dig up garbage from long ago to learn about how people lived. They find this garbage in deep holes where people threw away their old clothing, bones from food, and broken things like plates and bottles. The holes where they find this old garbage are called trash pits, or middens. A modern midden is a landfill. As history detectives, archaeologists analyze discarded objects to learn about the people who made or used them. In the future, archaeologists may dig up our landfills to learn more about how we lived.

What do you think they will find?

Anthropologists study objects, environments, and behaviors to learn about traditions and cultures. They analyze these clues to learn how people lived together in families and communities. Anthropologists also study what people believed in and what kinds of things were important to them.

All of these clues—letters, diaries, objects, environments, and behaviors—tell us about how people lived long ago. Some clues are easier to understand than others, and sometimes even historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists get confused. Still, being a history detective can be great fun!

Preprogram Activities: Be an Anthropologist from the Future!

Time required: 20 minutes

1. What would an anthropologist from the future learn about you by studying your room?

   In the space below, make a list of things that can be found in your room.

2. Imagine that you are an anthropologist from the future who is trying to figure out what the lives of people are like now by studying your room.

   How many people would you think live in this room? ____

   What is your *evidence*, or what makes you think that?

3. What kinds of clothing does the person who lives in this room wear? What is your *evidence*, or what makes you think that?

4. What kinds of things does the person who lives in the room like? Name at least two things that the person probably likes. What is your *evidence*, or what makes you think that?

5. What else can you tell about the person who lives in this room? Be sure to give your *evidence*.

Postprogram Activities

These activities include several articles from *Tar Heel Junior Historian* magazine. If you would like to receive free issues of future magazines, form a Tar Heel Junior Historian Association club in your school. To receive a membership application, please call Jessica Pratt at 919-807-7985, e-mail thjhaclubs@ncdcr.gov, or visit the museum's website at http://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org/thjha/index.html.

Activities regarding the Civil War in North Carolina:

1. **Scarcity and Substitution.** Continue to study the Civil War in North Carolina by sharing the article "'Starvation Will Stop It': Poverty on the North Carolina Home Front" from the fall 2000 issue of *Tar Heel Junior Historian* (page 8) magazine. Have students chart how North Carolinians made do during this time of scarcity and substitution.

2. **Try a Little Hardtack.** This hard biscuit was often part of Civil War soldiers' daily rations. The biscuits had to be soaked in liquid to make them edible. Have students make some hardtack (page 10).

3. **What Did He Say?** Civil War soldier vocabulary is colorful and informative. Try the matching game to see what you know (page 11).

Activities regarding the study of history through primary sources:

4. Study mystery artifacts related to sewing by sharing the photographs from the article "Ouch! Prick Your Finger!" (pages 13–16) from the spring 1988 issue of *Tar Heel Junior Historian* magazine. Have students form hypotheses about how these tools were used, and then discuss how sewing and clothes making have changed over time. *Note: the answers to the mystery artifacts are printed upside down on page 16.*

5. Share the article "Museum Detectives Use Solid Evidence" (pages 17–21) from the spring 1992 issue of *Tar Heel Junior Historian* magazine. Guide students to explore their own material culture by bringing objects from home that tell about themselves, their families, or their culture. Have students work in teams to interpret what the objects suggest about the needs and values of the people who use them.

6. Share the article "Oral Historians Listen to Witnesses" (pages 22–24) from the spring 1992 issue of *Tar Heel Junior Historian* magazine. Have students develop questions and interview family members about the past. Your class may gather general oral history, or they may prefer to focus their investigation around specific questions. Some possibilities might be to examine what young people have done for fun, how the prices of things have changed over time, or how school experiences have changed.

Postprogram Activities: Scarcity and Substitution

Students will create a chart to learn about the economic hardships of the North Carolina home front during the Civil War.

Time

One 50-minute class period

Materials

Copies of article "'Starvation Will Stop It': Poverty on the North Carolina Home Front" (page 8)
Overhead, chalkboard, or whiteboard
Paper and pencils

Procedure

1. Introduce the lesson by defining *scarcity* (lack of a particular good or service) and *substitution* (goods and services that can be used in place of other goods and services).

2. Have the students read the article individually or in groups.

3. Have group members list items that were scarce in North Carolina during the Civil War. The groups should report their findings and make a composite list on the left side of an overhead, chalkboard, or whiteboard.

4. Have groups use the readings to find out how North Carolinians substituted other goods to deal with the problem of scarcity. The groups should make a list of substituted items on the right side of the overhead, chalkboard, or whiteboard (listing each item opposite the corresponding scarce good, when possible).

5. Each group or individual should write a brief description of the impact of scarcity and "how people got by" on the home front in North Carolina during the Civil War. Descriptions could then be read to the class.

Extension Activities

1. The problems of scarcity and substitution were not limited to the Civil War era. Discuss with your students how they might handle the following scarcities:

    a. Many oil-producing nations agree to reduce the supply of crude oil. What can be substituted for gasoline? What methods could be used to reduce consumption of oil-based products?

    b. Imagine that a devastating hurricane has hit North Carolina. What goods would be scarce and for how long? What could be substituted for them?

2. Have students research rationing in the United States during World War II. Compare the shortages in the 1940s with the scarcity and substitutions encountered during the Civil War. Are there similarities? What differences exist? Why?

"Starvation Will Stop It": Poverty on the North Carolina Home Front

*by Christopher A. Graham**

In March 1863 Caleb Hampton of Davidson County wrote to his nephews in the Confederate army. He described hopelessness on the North Carolina home front and prayed that "this hellish war will Stop." He hoped the leaders would end the war but grimly predicted, "I think Starvation will Stop it." Federal armies defeated hungry Confederate armies on the battlefield, but not before North Carolinians experienced a tedious day-to-day struggle with poverty.

Most North Carolina farmers lived in relative comfort before the war. Families relied on bountiful crops for food and cash. Merchants traveled over unpaved roads to bring clothing and farm equipment that could not be made at home. And on a nearby farm or in the next town lived relatives who could help out in the event of an illness or other disaster. It was a sound and carefully balanced economy, but unprepared for the enormous disruptions brought by the Civil War.

Because of a shortage of leather, people wore wooden shoes such as this ca. 1864 one. *Courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

This ca. 1860 broad-brimmed, flat-crown lady's hat is made of braided pine needles with a wide hatband of plaid taffeta ribbon tied in a bow. *Courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

The Civil War disrupted North Carolina farm families. Young men enlisted in the army, and as the war continued, older men also joined or were drafted. The absence of around 125,000 men left most North Carolina farms without fathers, husbands, or sons to do the heavy work or make critical financial and agricultural decisions. In addition, the Union blockade of Confederate ports and the breakdown of roads and railroads caused the cost of food and other supplies to rise dramatically.

People missed salt the most. Without that preservative, food spoiled. The state's food production declined as men who harvested corn and wheat went off to war. Much food was diverted to the army, and every scrap of bread or meat became a valuable possession. North Carolina's mills produced cloth only for the army. Sources of fabric for clothing from outside the state and the South were cut by the blockade. Medicine, as well as food and cloth, disappeared from merchants' shelves by late 1862.

Poverty-stricken families clearly expressed their frustrations and blamed "speculators" and government policies for their sorrows. Speculators stashed food and supplies in order to sell them at the highest prices. The pangs of hunger increased when moneyless families knew their neighbors might have food in their houses but intended to sell it only for a great profit. T. H. Smith of Davidson County urged Governor Zebulon B. Vance to seize one hundred sacks of flour from speculators in Thomasville "for the benefit of soldiers family's," or there "must assuredly be some starvation." Also, government agents often went to farms and took food to be sent to soldiers in the army. Families did not mind sending provisions to their relatives in the ranks,

The war caused great turmoil and stress. Many people had to search for food so that they would not starve.

*Christopher A. Graham works as an assistant curator at the North Carolina Museum of History.

THJH, Fall 2000 5

Union soldiers raid a farm.

but they thought the agents took too much food from the poor and did not leave enough to feed families.

Ill-prepared state leaders tried to relieve the shortages. In December 1862 the legislature reserved $400,000 to give to counties for their citizens. County justices bought salt, bacon, and flour for agents to distribute to the needy. Yet the extent of near-starvation outweighed the efforts to prevent it. The legislature appropriated $6 million over the next two years, but families in the countryside continued to go hungry.

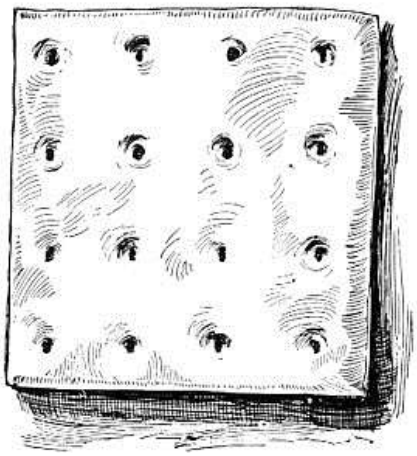
Some women took paid work and at times completely left the farm and their families to earn money. Wool and cotton mills producing cloth for soldiers' clothing throughout the state employed women as weavers. Other women, bound to their farms by children or chores, sewed together uniforms for the state. Mary C. Moore of Rowan County noted in a letter to Governor Vance that sewing trousers earned her only fifty cents a pair, and jackets brought only seventy-five cents. She might earn one dollar a day, Mary lamented, but at the time, flour cost fifty dollars a barrel.

Women learned to "make do or do without." Advice appeared in newspapers, and was passed between friends, on how to substitute common items for necessary goods that people could not obtain. Dried and ground okra passed for coffee. Boiled watermelon produced sugar. Wicks dipped in pine tar and wrapped around a corncob provided light in the absence of candles. Some women made stiff wooden shoes to wear instead of leather ones. Other women fashioned hats and bonnets out of pine straw.

Hungry North Carolinians reacted in different ways. A few, like Mary Moore and her friends, participated in "bread riots" in which they forcibly took food from speculators' and government warehouses. The shortages caused many people to question their loyalty to the Confederacy. Some women called for an end to the war under any circumstances, or they urged their men to desert from the army to return home and protect their families. Most North Carolinians on the home front remained loyal to the Confederacy, but with each tedious day of hunger and privation, they earnestly wished for an end to the war.

Confederate deserters in the Mountains of North Carolina. Some men worried so much about their families back home that they left the army without permission.

Postprogram Activities: Try a Little Hardtack



Hardtack is a hard biscuit made of flour, salt, and water often given to Civil War soldiers as part of their daily rations. Try making and tasting your own hardtack:

Ingredients:
Two parts flour
One part water
Pinch or two of salt

Directions:
Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Put flour and salt into a bowl and stir them together. Add water a bit at a time, still stirring. When the mixture gets too thick to stir with a spoon, continue with your hands.

If the dough is sticky, add a little more flour. If powdery, add a little more water.

Shape the dough into a ball. Flatten it on a floured surface with the palm of your hand. Roll out dough until about ½" thick. Cut into squares or circles. Use a skewer or nail to poke even holes in each piece.

Place on baking sheet. Bake until browned on both sides, about 10 minutes per side.

Taste your hardtack!

(Adapted from American Kids in History Series: *Civil War Days* and reprinted in "Remembering the Civil War," spring 2011 issue, *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 50, no. 2: 22)

Postprogram Activities: What Did He Say?

Soldiers during the Civil War often used the following words of phrases. Can you match the 1860s term in Column A below with its modern meaning in Column B?

Column A

1. Blue belly _____
2. Bread basket _____
3. Campaign _____
4. Coosh _____
5. Fit to be tied _____
6. Fresh fish _____
7. Front _____
8. Goobers _____
9. Hish and hash _____
10. Housewife _____
11. Hornets _____
12. Hunky-dory _____
13. Kepi _____
14. Laboratory _____
15. Pony _____
16. Possum _____
17. Sawbones _____
18. Skedaddle _____
19. Sutler _____
20. Up the spout _____

Column B

A. A buddy or friend
B. Hat or cap
C. To be in trouble or retreat
D. Insulting term for a Union soldier
E. Stomach
F. A surgeon
G. Series of battles
H. Peanuts
I. Building where ammunition was made
J. New soldiers
K. Bullets
L. Cornmeal and bacon grease fried together
M. Area where a battle is being fought
N. Boy soldier or small adult soldier
O. One-dish meal made from whatever a soldier had on hand
P. Small sewing kit with needles, thread, buttons, etc.
Q. Run away or retreat
R. OK or good
S. Angry
T. Civilian who followed soldiers to sell food, tobacco, toiletries, clothing

(Adapted from "Remembering the Civil War," spring 2011 issue, *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 50, no. 2: 22)

Answer Sheet: What Did He Say?

Soldiers during the Civil War often used the following words of phrases. Can you match the 1860s term in Column A below with its modern meaning in Column B?

Column A		***Column B***
1. Blue belly	__D___	A. A buddy or friend
2. Bread basket	__E___	B. Hat or cap
3. Campaign	__G___	C. To be in trouble or retreat
4. Coosh	__L___	D. Insulting term for a Union soldier
5. Fit to be tied	__S___	E. Stomach
6. Fresh fish	__J___	F. A surgeon
7. Front	__M___	G. Series of battles
8. Goobers	__H___	H. Peanuts
9. Hish and hash	__O___	I. Building where ammunition was made
10. Housewife	__P___	J. New soldiers
11. Hornets	__K___	K. Bullets
12. Hunky-dory	__R___	L. Cornmeal and bacon grease fried together
13. Kepi	__B___	M. Area where a battle is being fought
14. Laboratory	__I____	N. Boy soldier or small adult soldier
15. Pony	__N___	O. One-dish meal made from whatever a soldier had on hand
16. Possum	__A___	P. Small sewing kit with needles, thread, buttons, etc.
17. Sawbones	__F___	Q. Run away or retreat
18. Skedaddle	__Q___	R. OK or good
19. Sutler	__T___	S. Angry
20. Up the spout	__C___	T. Civilian who followed soldiers to sell food, tobacco, toiletries, clothing

(Adapted from “Remembering the Civil War,” spring 2011 issue, *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 50, no. 2: 22)

ACTIVITY: OUCH! PRICK YOUR FINGER!

By Marianne Wason

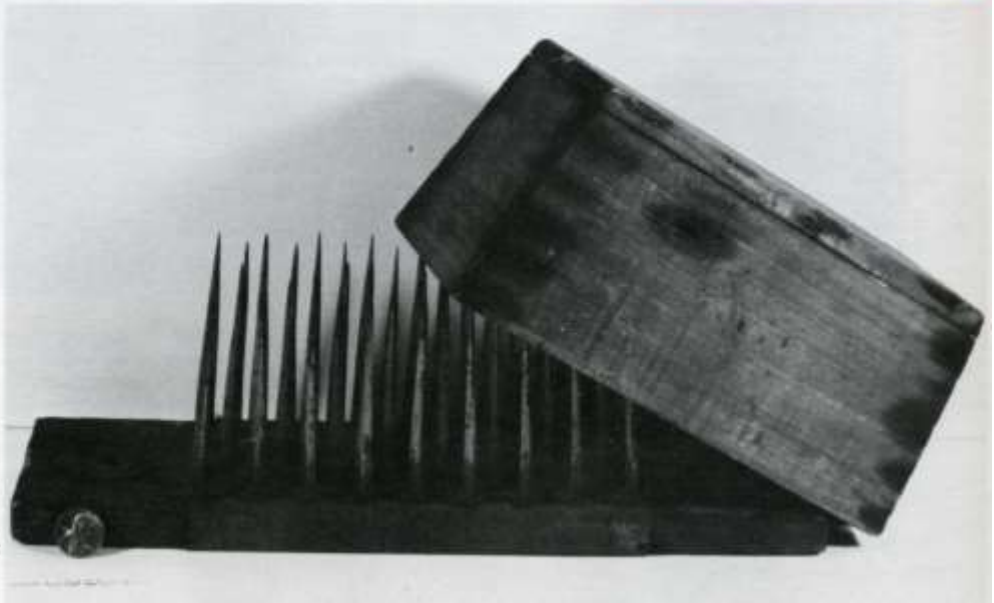
Can you identify these items?
All ten deal with textiles:

- Preparing fibers for spinning (two items)
- Making woven items (two items)
- Sewing (five items)
- Shaping a fabric (one item)

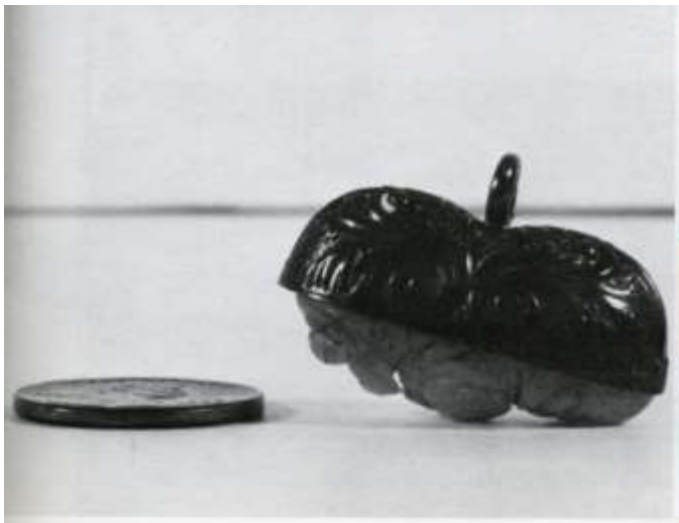
Think hard . . . use the clues . . . good luck!

This device will "raise your hackles,"
But I don't mean "get you mad."
You'd use this fearsome object

- To comb the fibers of flax.
- To brush the fleece of lambs.
- To scrub a floor of mats.
- To rid a rug of gnats.



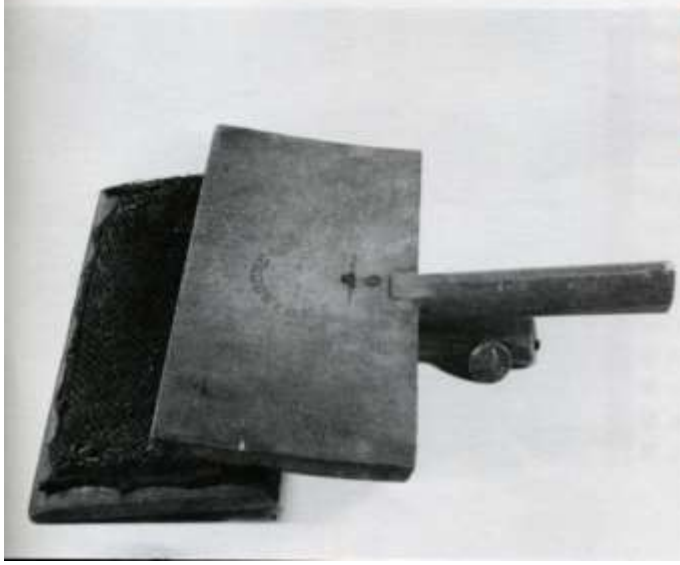
32



Just a silver peanut
Holding a bit of wax—
What's it for in sewing?
Is the question you may ask.

- To make your fingers softer?
- To make your loose thread stronger?
- To mend a minor rip?
- To soften needle tips?

For use by fingers that are nimble
This silver acorn hides a ————————.

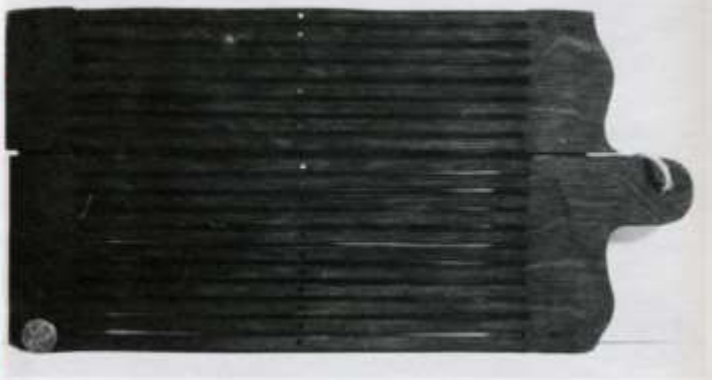


A pair of cards, for wool or cotton;
What do you think they do?
To find the answer turn to page
Sixteen and twenty-two!

33

From Wachovia in Salem
Comes this colonial treasure
To fashion cloth in narrow strips
Too numerous to measure.

What's its name?
Mini-weaver ■
Insta-cloth ■
Tape loom ■
Fabric Man ■



Back and forth with metal points
To push the fibers through;
What does this sliding tool produce?
A quilt? A rug? A shoe?

A "darning egg"—what could it be?
It can't pull thread or hold a quilt
Or comb out flax or spin some silk
Or fix a rip
Or knit a stitch—
So what's this basswood tool to do?
IT KEEPS ITS SHAPE—and that's the clue.
Now look up "darn" before you choose
Which one of these seems right to you:
A darning egg is a tool to use
In worndown shoes—to pound the soles. ■
In wornout socks—to mend the holes. ■
In brand-new gloves—to stretch them out. ■
In bulky clothes—to stomp them down. ■

34

In this age of cordless telephones
and portable computers,
Walkmen, beepers, videocams,
and mini copy machines,
We also have the ultimate
invention for a quilter:
The supermodern mini lightweight
H_____ S_____ M_____

Is this
A beater—for cotton and stiff wool and flax? ■
A heater—for needles and bobbins and tacks? ■
A creaser—for collars and draperies and slacks? ■
A pleater—for ruffles and edges and hats? ■

A sewing box—levels one through four:
Its bottom level is a drawer;
And so's its third, for storing more;
And level two, for spools of t_____;
And level one, to stick in pin_____.

Answers:
■ To comb flax fibers flax hackle)
■ To make thread stronger (thread wax)
■ Thimble
■ "Card" in fabrics on pages 16 and 22
■ Tape loom
■ A nut (nut hook)
■ Mend the holes in worn-out socks
■ Handheld sewing machine
■ A pleater (fluting irons)
■ Thread/beads

35

Museum detectives use solid evidence

By Wesley S. Creel

People have always made and used things in their lives. Those things may be as simple as a pin or a bow and arrow or as complex as a car or the space shuttle. History detectives who study them can tell the history of people, places, or events by looking at these things and understanding how and why they were used. They call these old objects artifacts, and the study of these objects and the people who used them they call **material culture**.

How do you think museum detectives can tell about the history of people through their artifacts? Think about what it would be like if you found something on the ground you had never seen before. How would you find out what it is? You might ask your friends, your parents, or your teachers. You might look it up in a book. It would take some time, but you probably could find information about it. These history detectives do the same thing.

The first step that museum detectives take in investigating artifacts is called description. This step has two parts. During the first part, museum registrars measure the artifact. Using rulers they measure width, height, and length. Then they turn the artifacts over to curators for the second part of description.

Curators and their assistants, called catalogers, look at the artifact very carefully and closely to describe what it is made of and how they think it was made. Sometimes they cannot tell much about an object by looking at it. So, they must talk to someone who used it or made it or someone who is an expert in this kind of artifact. They may even look for other things like it in reference books.

Curators and catalogers also do historical research. It might include information from secondary sources like county histories or primary sources like census reports, oral history interviews, or personal papers. This research explains why an artifact is historically important and how it fits into a society or a culture.

During this part they ask questions and try to find answers: how is this artifact different from any other artifact? How is it similar? How does it fit into the area or the time period? But one of the most important questions they ask is: what was it originally used for?

This basket was found along with other artifacts in Polk County. Museum detectives describe, document, classify, and interpret objects like this so that we can learn more about ourselves and North Carolina history.

18

Now the curators begin the second step called documentation and classification. In documentation, they want to know more about the artifact: how it was made, how it was used, why one material was used instead of another, why it was designed the way it was, why it was made and used, who used it, how they used it, and when they used it.

Based on their research investigation and answers to these questions in documentation, museum curators and their assistants try to place the artifact they are investigating into a category. This is called classification. You may want to think of categories in this way. There are different kinds of clothes: socks, shoes, shirts, pants, underclothes, sweaters, and coats. These are categories—or classes—of clothes and they are grouped by their different uses—what they were originally used for. So museum curators use a similar system to classify artifacts according to what they were originally used for.

The third step—called interpretation—is conducted by many different people in the museum who use information from the curator's investigation. The museum curators and catalogers write scholarly articles and books or give lectures. They also provide information about artifacts to exhibit designers who will create exhibits and educators who will create educational programs. Museum educators produce audiovisual programs, arrange demonstrations, produce publications, and give tours and talks.

We have described how museum detectives—registrars, curators, catalogers, exhibit designers, and educators—study material culture and explain it to visitors. Now we are going to provide an artifact example so that you can investigate it with us. Recently, museum detectives went to the Jackson family farm near Tryon in Polk County to investigate and pick up a large collection of artifacts. The Jackson family owned hundreds of things they had used on their farm from the 1850s to the 1920s, including farm tools and equipment, furniture, clothing, kitchen utensils, quilts and coverlets, and weapons.

During their work, one artifact stood out: a wooden basket. Let's go through the description, documentation and classification, and interpretation processes for this basket.

The registrars begin the description process. The basket measures 14 1/4 inches high, 17 5/8 inches long, and 16 inches wide. The curators and catalogers now take a closer look. The handle and the rods—long, thin, young branches of wood—are made of oak, with metal wire to replace broken or missing ones. It was made by hand by taking the rods and weaving them together.

Curators and catalogers begin the next step, documentation and classification. Documentation is first. They

In description, museum registrars measure the basket and describe its appearance.

19

compare this basket to other baskets they have seen in the museum, in other museums, or in reference books. They discover that metal buckets, tin cans, glass jars, and other machine-made containers were rare on a farm in the piedmont foothills in the 1800s. Baskets were among the most common containers during this period. They could have been made from local and inexpensive materials, and often they were made by family members or by neighbors. Baskets were used to carry laundry, to carry vegetables from the garden to the house, or to carry wood from the woodshed for heating and cooking stoves.

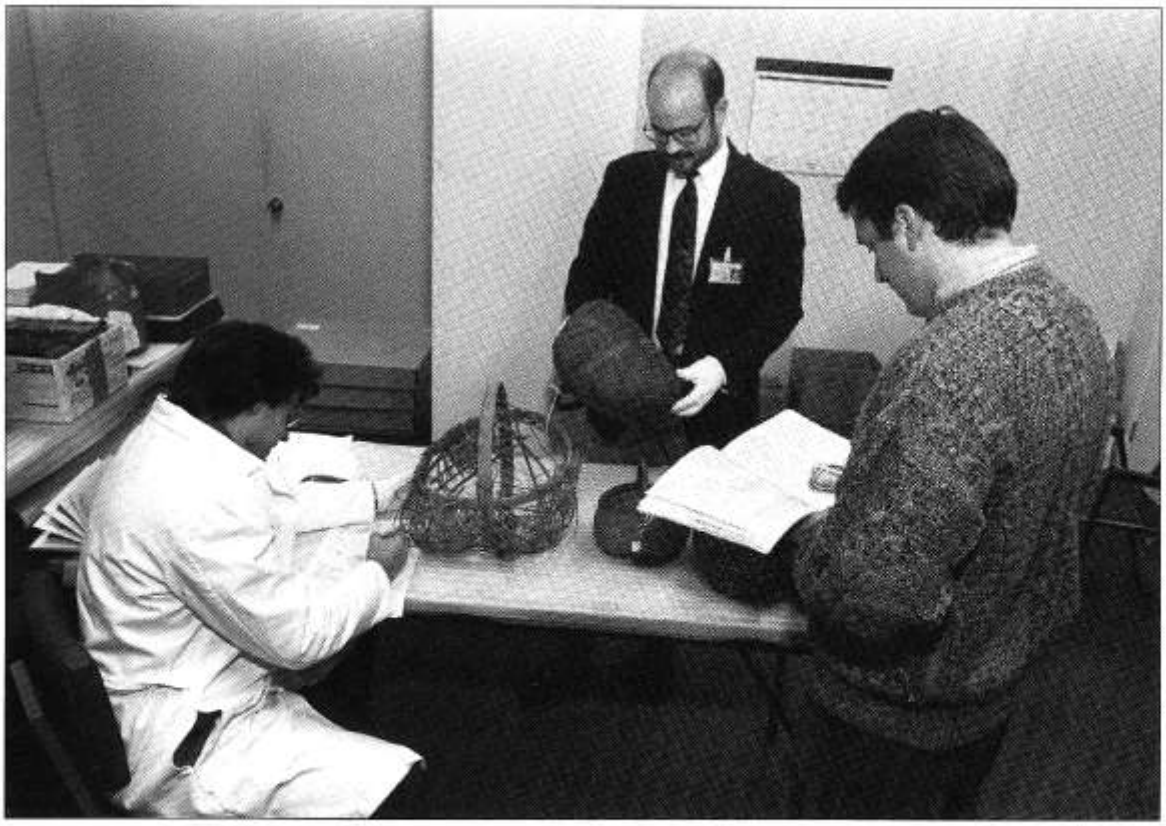
Comparing this basket to other baskets of different shapes and sizes, detectives think it was used to carry eggs. And they think that it was used during the late 1800s and early 1900s in this area. And being made of oak splints, it was made of the same materials as other baskets during this time.

Now the curators and catalogers have questions about the people who made and used the basket. For instance, were the eggs collected by the family for the family? Were they collected to sell for cash? Or were they collected for both? Which person in the family used the basket to collect eggs? Was collecting eggs a job for an adult or a child? Was it a job for a grandparent or a parent? Did a man or woman collect the eggs? If a child collected the eggs, was it the oldest or the youngest? Was it a boy or girl?

Sometimes they ask questions that have no answers and have to guess. Why did the owners keep the basket when it was in such bad shape? Why did the owner of the basket keep repairing it and using it? These are some of the answers they came up with. Perhaps it was in bad shape and the eggs could have fallen out. Perhaps the family was poor and it was the only basket. Maybe the family placed a high value on saving money by using something over and over again for a long time. Maybe it was a "good luck" egg basket. Maybe the basket meant something special to its owner.

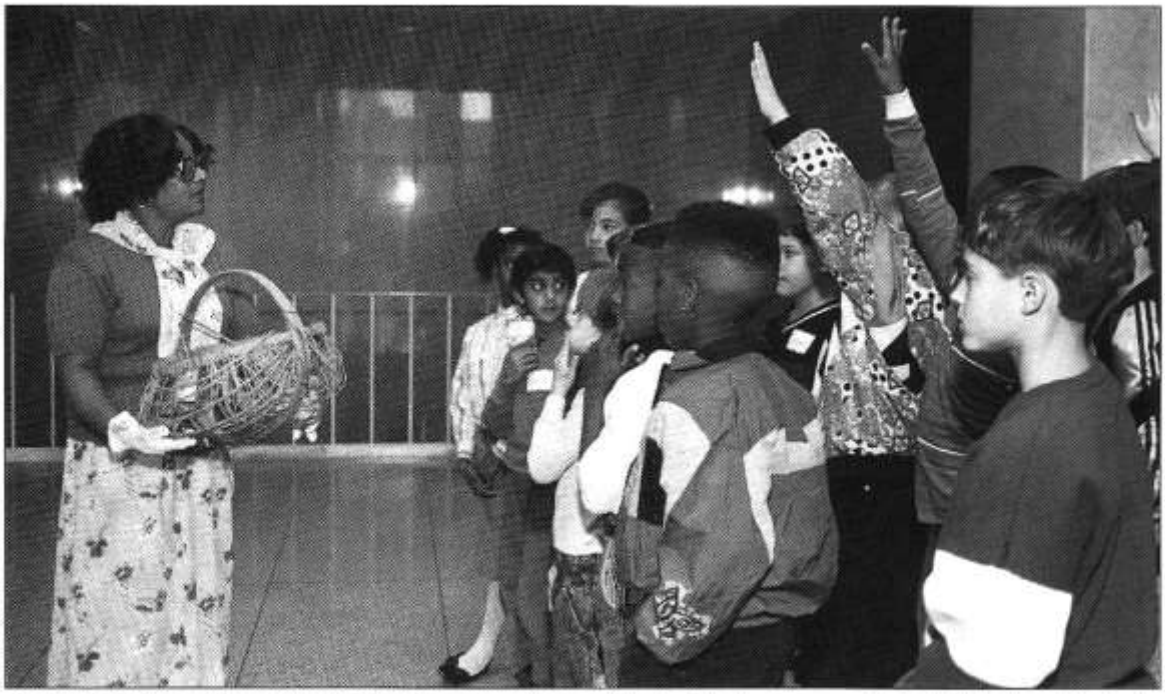
Now they look the basket up in a special museum book to see how it fits in different classes of similar or different baskets. This way of classifying is used not only in this museum but in other museums throughout the world. The basket fits into the large class of objects called "Tools and equipment." Within that class it fits in the "Agricultural tools and equipment" class and then into a smaller one called "Baskets, gathering."

The museum curators and educa-



In documentation and classification, museum curators and catalogers try to understand how this basket is like and unlike other baskets. To do this, they read books and compare this basket to other baskets in the museum. They use this information to understand the hows, wheres, and whys of North Carolina history.

20



After description, documentation, and classification, this museum educator explains to visitors the importance of the basket in the lives of farm families living in piedmont North Carolina in the late 1880s and early 1900s.

tors work together to tell the story of the basket for people who visit the museum. The curators provide educators with their historical research and their description, documentation, and classification information. Educators use this information to develop interpretive programs and publications, including touch talks, slide programs, and gallery tours. The purpose of the N.C. Museum of History is to "interpret the culture and social, economic, and political history of North Carolina from prehistory to the present; and to collect, preserve, and utilize artifacts and other material significant to the state." So curators and educators must use the basket to tell North Carolinians about some part of their history.

This basket is solid evidence of a group of people who lived and worked on a piedmont farm not too long ago. Museum detectives will use this evidence to explain about North Carolina history.

You can start your own investigation about your material culture. You can start in your house. Do you have any artifacts like egg baskets? Do you have any objects that you use, like an egg basket, to gather food? Is there an object in your house that you would like to know about? What kind of artifacts do you or your parents own that they use in the kitchen? What does that artifact tell you about you? Your family? Your house, your county, your state? What does that artifact tell you about your material culture? You may end up with more questions than answers. ❐

Definition

Material culture is all the objects or tools—artifacts—and the group of people who use them. Museum detectives who study material culture are interested in finding out about how, where, when, and why people use artifacts. They are also interested in

- people dealing with their natural environment (when, how, and where they make shelter, get food, protect themselves from the weather—heat, cold, sun, rain, wind)
- people relating to other people (when they show wealth or status by wearing expensive clothes or work clothes; wearing lots of gold jewelry; driving big expensive cars, small foreign cars, family vans, or four-wheel drive vehicles)
- people expressing their thoughts and ideas (when they speak, create art, or worship)

Oral historians listen to witnesses

by Anne R. Phillips

I met Nevada Jane Hall in 1986 when she was ninety-eight years old. She lived alone in a two-story, white frame house off Lynchburg Road on the western edge of Stokes County. "Moved from over yonder in Surry County, lived in a log house over there, two little rooms," she remembers. Her family moved to the Stokes County house in 1891. Nevada Jane, called Miss Vadie, was three years old at the time and sat on top of a wagon load of corn pulled by two borrowed white horses.

Yet life was still tough after she moved with her family: "Traded him [an old horse] for a pair of old mules. How in the world with three children—wasn't one of them big enough to work how they lived. No openings to plant a garden nor nothing. I'll tell you, though, Mama saved

Nevada Jane Hall, Miss Vadie, remembers moving from Surry County to this house in Stokes County in 1891. In oral history interviews, she tells her family history. If this history of her family is similar to many farm families in the piedmont in the early 1900s, how could her oral history help history detectives?

22

Miss Vadie as a young woman (on the right) with one of her sisters.

everything. They had to or couldn't have lived."

History detectives often use oral history from people like Miss Vadie to capture personal information. Sometimes this information cannot be found in other primary sources like diaries and letters. People being interviewed by oral historians are like witnesses. Historians carry on conversations with them, explore new directions, follow up points, or ask more about something they find important or interesting. The witnesses can explain thoughts and feelings. For example, Miss Vadie was amazed that her mother could provide clothes for the family with as little as they had: "How she dressed those children, I don't know. She had an aunt that had an old loom, and she'd make cloth so we had wool clothes to wear through the winter. When we got up big enough, they taught us how to knit. With a kerosene lamp, little bitty cookstove, Becky, Mama, and me would set there and knit every night. Figuring about two pair of stockings apiece, and they would last all winter. If the legs was good, next winter ravel them off and knit down below, and they would go another year."

Oral history also fills in gaps left unsaid by other sources. Some history books tell us facts and explain ideas, but they sometimes do not give us details about people or how they felt. Miss Vadie tells that she liked outdoor work. We rarely find this sort of information in books: "I always wished I'd been a man; all I wanted to do was to get out in the fields. Mother did all the cooking. I'd take some twine and I'd knit some mittens; leave your fingers out. Fit them to use your hoe, so your hands would stay white. Long sleeves. I never did burn my skin. We'd plant corn. We'd take a gooseneck hoe. Follow that plow every row."

How does the oral historian study history? The oral historian gathers history by interviewing someone—asking questions. The oral historian points them in a direction or train of thought and listens to the answer and records it on tape. These are often descriptions about themselves, family, community, and events. When Miss Vadie and I talked about tobacco harvesting, I wanted to know more details about selling tobacco. I asked a question and this is what she told me: "After the family primed tobacco . . . they got it cured out, we'd take all the leaves off them stalks, grade it, then tie it up in a bundle. You had to tie it nice. That ain't half of it. Tie that over, and then put it on a two-horse wagon. Drive to Winston-Salem on a dirt road and be gone for three days to sell tobacco."

The first oral history interviews I did were with my own family. I wanted to know, for instance, about

Miss Vadie at a recent birthday party.

my mother's life as a teacher and her own mother's life as a teacher in rural Mecklenburg County, Virginia. So I asked Mama the questions I wanted to know most. What was her mother like? Did Grandmother and Grandfather write letters to each other when they were courting? How did Mama feel when her own mother died when Mama was only eight years old? Why did Mama decide to study music? Only by asking Mama these questions could I find answers. I am grateful that she allowed me to tape-record our conversations.

So when I interviewed Miss Vadie, I asked her some of the questions I had asked Mama. What was Miss Vadie's mother like? Her father? In Miss Vadie's family, who liked to cook? Who built the fires in the woodstove? Did Miss Vadie's mother work in the fields with the crops? Did her sisters prefer work in the fields or in the house? Some information I gleaned by direct questions to Miss Vadie. Other information she volunteered without my questioning.

The *way* Miss Vadie told information as well as *what* she told was important. We do not have that kind of richness when we read letters or books and cannot hear the tone of voice. So the way Miss Vadie looked or spoke, the way she laughed or raised her eyebrows, added more to the story.

To be a good oral historian, you must establish rapport—a sense of trust. Sometimes a neighbor or friend of someone you want to interview must introduce you to that person. In my case, with Miss Vadie, the county librarian suggested that I talk to her: "But she may not let you in." I was hoping Miss Vadie would have good information, but I would have to respect her feelings, or she might not let me in the door at all. When I knocked, she let me in. I told her I wanted to know more about farm women and asked if we could talk. From that moment on, we not only shared information and trusted each other but also became good friends.

It is a good idea to request permission in writing to interview. This protects you and the interviewee from misunderstandings. Some interview forms give the interviewer permission to tape-record or permission to donate the tape to a school or county library.

In interviewing, the oral historian should follow these suggestions:

- Go on the interview by yourself.
- Interview only one person at a time.
- If the television is on when you arrive, visit a little bit and then ask permission to turn it off during the interview.
- Remember that background noises may be a distraction on the tape.
- When you are finished, label the tape with your name, the interviewee's name, the date, and the place.

Miss Vadie's life is her story. Her accounts of her thoughts and feelings give a picture of her life growing up on a farm in the northwestern piedmont of North Carolina. Her story helps the student of history to learn more than what can be found in history books, more about individual lives. It also helps to place those lives in the larger picture of North Carolina history.

How was Nevada Jane Hall's life similar to stories you have heard from your aunts and uncles, parents and grandparents? How would your grandparents describe their childhoods? If you would like to know, ask them. They might have a story for you. ❐

Contact Information

We hope that you have enjoyed taking part in this distance learning program. We invite your comments and questions. Please take advantage of other distance learning programs offered by the North Carolina Museum of History, including History-in-a-Box kits, videos on demand, educator notebooks, and the Tar Heel Junior Historian Association, as well as professional development opportunities for educators. For more information, visit http://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org/edu/Classroom.html.

North Carolina Museum of History
5 East Edenton Street
Raleigh, NC 27601

Phone: 919-807-7900
Fax: 919-713-8655

http://ncmuseumofhistory.org/

Division of State History Museums • Office of Archives and History
North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, www.ncculture.com

NORTH CAROLINA
MUSEUM OF HISTORY
History Happens Here